VF- Battle of Belleau Wood

tween units out of contact was the first critical problem, to be solved empirically. "Just let us work this out our own way," one staff officer suggested. The relief was made more or less on that basis, the Americans taking up ground to the rear of where the fire fight went on, the French falling back through them as the pressure rose.

Harbord was with Bundy. A French liaison officer arrived, saluting as his words tumbled out: "General Degoutte's compliments. The situation is so grave that he had to send your 9th Regiment into line below the highway without waiting to put the order through Division Headquarters. He asks the Division Commander to put in another regiment at once."

Bundy turned to Colonel Preston Brown, his Chief of Staff, and gave the order: "Send the 23rd Infantry."

But the 23rd was nowhere in sight. Being last in the column, it was still on the road. So Bundy turned to Harbord and gave the order: "You must put in one of your regiments."

Harbord said: "I'd be glad to, General. But I hope you won't split my brigade in its first action. Can't you let the Paris-Metz road be the dividing line between the brigades, so that I may place my regiments now north of the road?"

It was agreed, and on that spur of the moment decision came the alignment and the tremendous consequence, to the glory of the United States Marines, to the fortunes of the two brigades, and to the future of the world.

Belleau Wood

On June 1, the Germans wheeled from Château-Thierry, captured Hill 204 to the west, and occupied the village of Vaux, which lies astride the Paris-Metz road. Farther to the north, they drove into Belleau Wood.

The U.S. 9th Infantry Regiment deployed through Le Thiolet, directly facing Vaux. By evening, the Marine Brigade had established a line starting in the Clerembauts Wood just north of the road, running on through Lucy-le-Bocage and Belleau Wood to the village of Champillon. The rest of the 2nd Division was held in reserve. Occasional shellfire was now dropping into the American positions and low-flying Fokkers were strafing the troops with machine gun fire. At midnight, Degoutte called Bundy. He had just learned that a three-mile gap existed in the French line around Gandelu and the Germans were coming on. Part of the 23rd Infantry Regiment, some of the 5th Marines, and elements of the 2nd Engineers were rushed to that flank and took positions around Prémont.

From Duchêne, who was still commanding the French Sixth Army, came a message that got to Harbord: "Your men must hold the line at all hazards." Then came a second message: "Have your men prepare entrenchments some hundreds of yards to rearward in case of need." Harbord passed the two contradictory orders to his troops with his own withering rejection slip: "We dig no trenches to fall back on. The Marines will hold where they stand."

The Americans never really dug in. Bayonets and mess kit lids were their only tools. With these they cut away full-length, head-cover troughs, "our graves" they called them, in the same light way they had parodied the last line of the war's best-remembered song: "But we won't come back, we'll be buried over there." Into each grave flopped a solitary rifleman, and a space of ten to fifteen yards was all his to defend. No German ever had the chance to whistle while passing this graveyard. There was no passing. The drive that had started May 27 on the Chemin des Dames came to a standstill on June 3, just before command of the vital front was passed to Bundy.

There had still been no headlong assault by the enemy against the American resistance line. Yet the way was wide open. Degoutte had preconceived that the 2nd Division would be used largely as a back-up force. His own corps had broken, then slipped away. Belleau village, Torcy, and Bussiares were abandoned. The Germans came on into Belleau Wood and made for Lucy. In relation to the problem fast developing, the catch-as-catch-can deployment of the 2nd Division could not have been bettered.

Hourly the shellfire built upward. Late on June 4, the 2nd Artillery Brigade arrived, unlimbered, and joined fire with the French batteries along the crescent of hills behind Lucy and Coupru on both sides of the Paris-Metz road. The last of the retreating French infantry sifted through the American lines that day.

The middle ground was now clear and the Americans could fire when ready. Germans were massing beyond it, preparatory to jump-off, but the Marines sprang first.

In the early morning of June 6, the 1st Battalion of the 5th Marines (Major Julius S. Turrill) attacked from Hill 142 toward the Lucy-Torcy road and gained its objective without use of artillery. Late the same afternoon the 3rd Battalion of the 5th Marines (Major Benjamin S. Berry) and the 3rd Battalion of the 6th Marines (Major Berton W. Sibley) jumped off together, the first going at the west side of Belleau Wood, the second striking for its southern end and the near village of Bouresches. The French had told Harbord that the enemy had not taken over the wood, except for an entrenched corner in the northeast section. That was error, and the Marines, due to greenness, had compounded it, failing to send forth scouting patrols.

Belleau Wood was an old hunting preserve, irregularly shaped, covering about one square mile. A dry ravine

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edged its southern face, where lay Lucy village. Bouresches was just beyond it on the east, or the enemy side. The ground covered by the forest was rough, rocky, and boulder strewn—ideal for nesting machine guns. Every forest lane in this checkered plot was also a fire lane for riflemen, and how to fight in forest was one technique wholly overlooked by U.S. manuals on tactics. Belleau Wood had become by this hour the jagged, cutting tip of the German salient projecting from the Aisne. If the Americans were determined to have it or die trying, emplaced steel, rock, and timber were all on the German side. It was the right arena for the showdown.

So back to the assault. Heads down to the fire, so that the helmet would also help cover the neck, the men of Berry's battalion went forward in line through a quarter-mile-long buckwheat field. When it is near ripening and under gentle wind, buckwheat ripples like an emerald lake. This field rippled for the Marines under the scythe of massed enemy machine gun fire. It chopped the wheat, and great gaps appeared in the Marine line as men dropped from wounds. Berry's arm was shredded by bullets but he staggered on. Two hundred, three hundred yards they made. Then the assault folded. A few hands made it to the southwestern tip of the forest. The others were pinned down in the buckwheat. Enemy fire continued to sear the field while the light lasted. When dark fell, those who could, crawled back to friendly lines.

Sibley's battalion was more fortunate. On the southern side of Belleau Wood, the ground and shrubbery had a helpfully irregular pattern; also the ravine afforded some cover. Even so, the battalion, going forward in four waves, was singed throughout the long approach by rifle and machine gun fire. At last watchers saw it vanish into the forest, and then the real fight began.

The German guns had interlocking and mutually protecting fire bands; to attack one nest merely attracted the bullet swarm from the one beyond it. The Americans were no longer walking; they slithered on their bellies from rock to rock, then heaved their grenades, and went in with a rush. But dark came quickly in the forest and the thickening shadows signaled the need to prepare for night defense. Sibley and his men were in a thoroughly nasty position—caught in a wood with one flank absolutely open to the German Army. The enemy was bound to attempt coming around the end by night, and Sibley had no intention of withdrawing. By 9 P.M. he was sending back word that he had mopped up the south end of Belleau Wood and his men had dug in for the night. Two companies of the 2nd Engineers were sent in to help him hold the position.

That wasn't all for the day. As combat field intelligence flowed back to Harbord by runner, he concluded that the Germans had three lines of trenches in Belleau Wood, the first facing toward Lucy and Bouresches, the second running north to south through the center, the third about 150 yards in from the northern face. Sharpshooter pits and barbed entanglements made it a complete system. It would all have to be taken yard by yard. One company from Major Thomas Holcomb's battalion of the 6th Marines carried Bouresches village by storm. When Captain Duncan was killed leading his troops, lank Lieutenant Clifton Cates took over. So began the rise of both Holcomb and Cates to the chieftaincy of the Marine Corps.

Between what matters and what seems to matter, no true line can be drawn in combat. Belleau Wood is a prime example. As of that night, the Marines, by attacking on an order from their Army brigadier, had fixed the first wholly testing ordeal between Germans and Americans on this otherwise insignificant wood patch. Harbord's men had validated his estimate of them by embracing a completely unfamiliar task, wherein heart counted more than science. In all time before, nothing great had ever happened in Belleau Wood. Relative to the fronts of the contending forces, it was not a key position but a blind alley. The Germans could not use it for the marshaling of large forces with which to resume the offensive. The Americans didn't really need it, this springboard to nowhere, for the vital Paris-Metz road did not run through it. Massive shelling of the wood, had there been time, might have eliminated the block. It was not to be.

Belleau Wood was just one of those things like Lexington and the Alamo—an accident that changed the face of history. From the first go, both sides remained absolutely committed. And the German Crown Prince, who commanded the army group, was a little foolish to let it happen that way. He was hazarding the highest possible stakes in a local dogfight; and he had picked on the wrong people. The Marine Brigade because it was unique—a little raft of sea soldiers in an ocean of Army—was without doubt the most aggressive body of die-hards on the Western Front.

Sibley's toe hold in the wood, precarious from the beginning, grew ever more untenable. The Marines were so close to the Germans that the American artillery could give Sibley's line no support. All advantage of ground, as well as of numbers, was with the enemy. The Germans could reinforce and resupply as needed; the Americans could not. Space in which to operate was the critical factor.

On June 11 the Marines in the forward foxholes were pulled back to the southern edge of the wood. Then all the power of the Allied artillery assembled back of the Paris road was directed on the wood. That pleasant stand of greenery soon ranged like an army of gray struck dead in its tracks. Everywhere lay splintered timber, reeking of

gas and the stench of the dead. The Marines drove back in again, as they ever do, while the enemy was still shocked. In that violent rebound, they captured two thirds of the wood and three hundred Germans. Then they resumed the position-by-position siege of the forest. Though thrown back, the Germans would not quit. On June 13 they mounted their main counterattack. Sixty per cent of Harbord's troops were qualified marksmen. That's when the pay-off came for time on the range. The attack was everywhere thrown back with heavy loss.

Due to a freak circumstance, Belleau Wood was already a famous fight, and the Marine Brigade's reputation had eclipsed the public's awareness that the A.E.F. also included a few soldiers. Floyd Gibbons, the war correspondent, had filed a skeleton dispatch with the censor in Paris in which he identified the Marine units, shortly after the action began. Then in the attack on June 6, his left eye was shot out. But a rumor spread that he had been killed in action. The censor in Paris, who chanced to be his personal friend, heard the doleful tidings. In that moment, sentiment overrode duty; he concluded that the dispatch should go through untouched in memory of his "dead" friend. While Gibbons lay in the hospital awaiting the black patch that became his trademark, America thrilled with the revelation that the Marines were winning the war.

They didn't quite win Belleau Wood singlehandedly. On June 14 the 23rd Infantry extended its front to take over as far north as the edge of Bouresches. Then two days later the 7th Infantry of the 3rd Division moved into the wood and took over from the Marines, who needed a rest. The 7th tried, but both of its attacks were repulsed. Colonel Wendell C. Neville of the Marines had been left in command of the sector and his own people got back to him on June 23, the 7th Infantry hitting the road again.

On June 25 the 3rd Battalion of the 5th Marines, one company of the 6th Machine Gun Battalion, and two companies of the 4th Machine Gun Battalion (Army) made the last assault in the woods. When at last the line broke into the open, leaving the splintered trees cleared of Germans, it had five hundred POW's to show for the day. Marine Major Maurice E. Shearer reported to Harbord: "Wood now exclusively U.S. Marine Corps." Well, there had been just a few soldiers going along for the ride.

The 2nd Division's other brigade under Lewis had also fought through the same June. Small-scale German attacks had been beaten off; numerous raids into enemy country had been staged. But the infantry could mount nothing big because the artillery was absorbed in helping the Marines. To its front lay Hill 204, a considerable obstacle. At its foot was Vaux, a stout village of stone-walled homes, now occupied by Germans who had fire-slotted the walls and trained their machine guns on the approaches.

The brigade wanted Vaux, and its intelligence officers already had in hand the one Frenchman who knew most about how it was laid out—the village stonemason. The operations people drew up plans based on his information, whereby each squad and platoon would have a specified house or block target, and would know the route, the sortie points, and the dead space. The artillery was instructed to register fire on Vaux, but to do it in a drifting way, moving back and forth from it to other targets, so that the Germans wouldn't guess what was coming.

At dawn on July 1 the barrage was loosed. Vaux rocked. Roofs and walls were riven. One hour later the fire was lifted to the slopes beyond and the infantry charged the village. The 2nd Battalion of the 9th Infantry did that part of it; the 3rd Battalion, 23rd Infantry, took the woods around it. It wasn't a great fight; grenades and automatic fire quelled the last resistance within the houses and by noon the mop-up was complete.

The storming of Vaux completed the operation of the 2nd Division along the Paris-Metz road. That night a French regiment, supported by two platoons of the 111th

A.E.F. artist Wallace Morgan sketched this front line dressing station in a culvert under the road to Lucy, near Belleau Wood.

Infantry of the U.S. 28th (Pennsylvania) Division tried to take Hill 204. When the smoke cleared and the dust settled, the Germans still held its crest.

The Marines had not won the war, but their brigade had stopped the Germans on the Paris road. The Crown Prince's dangerously narrow salient had afforded an opportunity to make Germans pay for reckless overextension. Yet, save for this body check by the 2nd Division, with the French Sixth Army in dissolution, the Germans would have anchored in far stronger positions before pulling up. It was Ludendorff's fatal mistake that he did not earlier compel a broadening of his front by strengthening the movement through Soissons. The two brigades under Harbord and Lewis exacted the price for that error. It is absurd to say that if the 2nd had not chosen its battlefield and then held the line, someone else would have done it farther along. Amid defeat and uncertainty there had to be one clear trumpet blast. The Americans had sounded it. The French heard it. Their hearts leaped up. They were no longer alone on the right flank.

In June the U.S. 2nd Division had taken 1,687 German prisoners, more than all the British armies had captured that month. The cost had come high. The division had suffered 9,777 casualties; 1,811 of its members had died fighting. American blood was never shed on any battlefield to better effect. The Marine Brigade had used up four enemy divisions during its month in Belleau Wood. By order of Degoutte, who had been commanding the French Sixth Army since mid-June, the skeletonized forest was renamed *Bois de la Brigade de Marine*. Enraptured, Clemenceau visited the division to add his voice to the paeans of praise for the heroes who had barred the road to Paris.

One Million Yanks

Three days after Vaux fell, American G.H.Q. at Chaumont, trying to make the most mileage from that event while at the same time exacting double duty from the Fourth of July holiday, announced loudly that more than one million Americans had arrived in France. The 26th Division had come from the Toul area to relieve the 2nd in line. The 42nd was returning from eighty-two days in line under British command, during which it had suffered 2,014 casualties. The 4th and 5th (Regular) were finishing their on-job training, the 78th, 89th, 92nd, 37th, 29th, 90th, 79th, and 91st were all fresh off the boats. Some were superbly commanded, as in the case of the 90th under Major General Henry T. Allen; others were led by military fossils who were unduly hard on their troops.

The Americans came armed with the Model 1917 rifle, a weapon so awkward and crudely tooled that their fire would have done little execution with it, even if Pershing had put that main emphasis on sharpshooter training with which legend credits him. They arrived in hot OD woolens with choker collars, which garb in the July heat only added another atrocity to the Western Front. When they came down the gangplank, they stood tall and appeared all-powerful, thanks partly to the campaign hat. But after the issue of that badge of the warrior, the overseas cap, they looked more big-eared than robust. Yet they radiated vigor and confidence.

There has never been a prouder, happier, more talkative army under the American flag. Their favorite expression was: "Start arguin', bastards." Amid snafus, which were frequent, some joker invariably would sound off with that pet A.E.F. phrase: "She said there'd be days like this." As they marched over the old Roman roads, they sang the bawdiest songs within memory: "Lulu," "Frankie and Johnny," and "The Fusiliers," a ditty that was later cleaned up to become the "I've Got Sixpence" of World War II. In one respect they differed from later American armies. The higher NCO's had extraordinary authority and prestige, stoutly upheld by the officer corps.

The men of the A.E.F. were not blind to their hardships or unaware that some of the load might have been lightened through more thoughtfulness on the part of others. But they saw these things as incidental. Above and beyond the turmoil, they understood that the nation was in danger, that they had been called, and that they had to do what they could. In that spirit, the 1918 soldier went forward, respecting higher authority, believing unreservedly in the sanctity of an order, heartened by his faith in the American people and his love of country. When this man fought, he and his comrades whooped it up as if the combat field were a football stadium. Training had not taught him that; he did what came naturally.

Yet neither the swarming of the Yanks, nor the proof of their mettle in the battle along the Paris road, convinced the Allies that the scale was already tipping. In the name of Foch, the three Prime Ministers—Clemenceau, Lloyd George, and Orlando—cabled Mr. Wilson their thanks, with the postscript that at least one hundred American divisions would be needed to win the war. Pershing was hardly less pessimistic. On June 18 he cabled Secretary Baker an estimate, promptly followed up by letter, that if he could be given eighty divisions by midsummer of 1919, the war might well be won by late autumn. Mr. Baker accepted Pershing's estimate, and the War Department was ordered to proceed with an eighty-division plan.

Possibly more clearly than his enemies, Ludendorff began to see the writing on the wall. His appreciation of the